

Plover program called success

By KENDRA JOHNSON
The Patriot Ledger

DUXBURY — An experiment on Duxbury Beach aimed at enticing piping plovers to nest there is being called a success.

The first pair of piping plovers to nest on the South Shore last month chose to lay eggs at the center of the trial site.

The private Duxbury Beach Reservation funded the experiment. It involved spreading a foot of sand over a half-acre of beach grass near the end of Duxbury Beach on the bay side.

The idea is to create the unvegetated nesting habitat preferred by the plovers.

The plover, a tiny shore bird the color of sand, is on the federal endangered species list. It is illegal to kill, harm or harass the birds. Vehicles cannot drive within 300 feet of a plover chick until it is 35 days old and mature enough to fly.



A plover on
Duxbury Beach.

Those regulations have pitted owners of four-wheel drive vehicles against environmentalists and federal officials on many New England beaches. The Duxbury Beach plan is intended to increase the number of plovers but also keep them away from beach traffic and predators.

On April 23, the first plover pair to nest on the South Shore laid four eggs on Duxbury Beach, said Scott Hecker, director of the

coastal waterbird program for the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

"The experiment was a success," said Reservation Trustee Al Vautrinot, "especially since the first nest on the South Shore was found in that area. That's amazing."

The nest is surrounded by a 4-foot high wire fence enclosed on top to keep predators away.

"The locals call it 'the plover playpen,'" Hecker said.

The adult plovers are just small enough to walk through the mesh. Though there is a fox den 200 feet from the nest, Hecker said the birds are protected.

The plover pair has been "happily nesting and incubating its eggs and waiting for the big day," Hecker said.

Town staff and two of Hecker's staff members check the nest daily. Hecker said the eggs are expected to hatch June 7.

When the eggs hatch, staff will be assigned to stay with the babies all day. Hecker said day-old plovers can walk up to one mile and are attracted to open areas where there are often vehicles.

"There are no real issues between people and plovers, only between vehicles and plovers," Hecker said.

Hecker said the experiment site is the best feeding habitat on the beach and that the birds will not have to travel far for food.

Ten plover pairs have nested on Duxbury Beach, but only one has

Nest seen as proof plover program works

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nested on the experiment site. Hecker said the birds are territorial and need an area about 50 yards wide. He said two pairs would be the most that would be expected to nest at the same time on the 25 by 100-yard experiment site.

Several pairs of plovers still have not yet nested. About 14 plover pairs nest on the beach annually.

"We're right on target," Hecker said.

The official count of the plover population will not be taken until early June, and Hecker said Duxbury could see several more pairs than usual by that time.

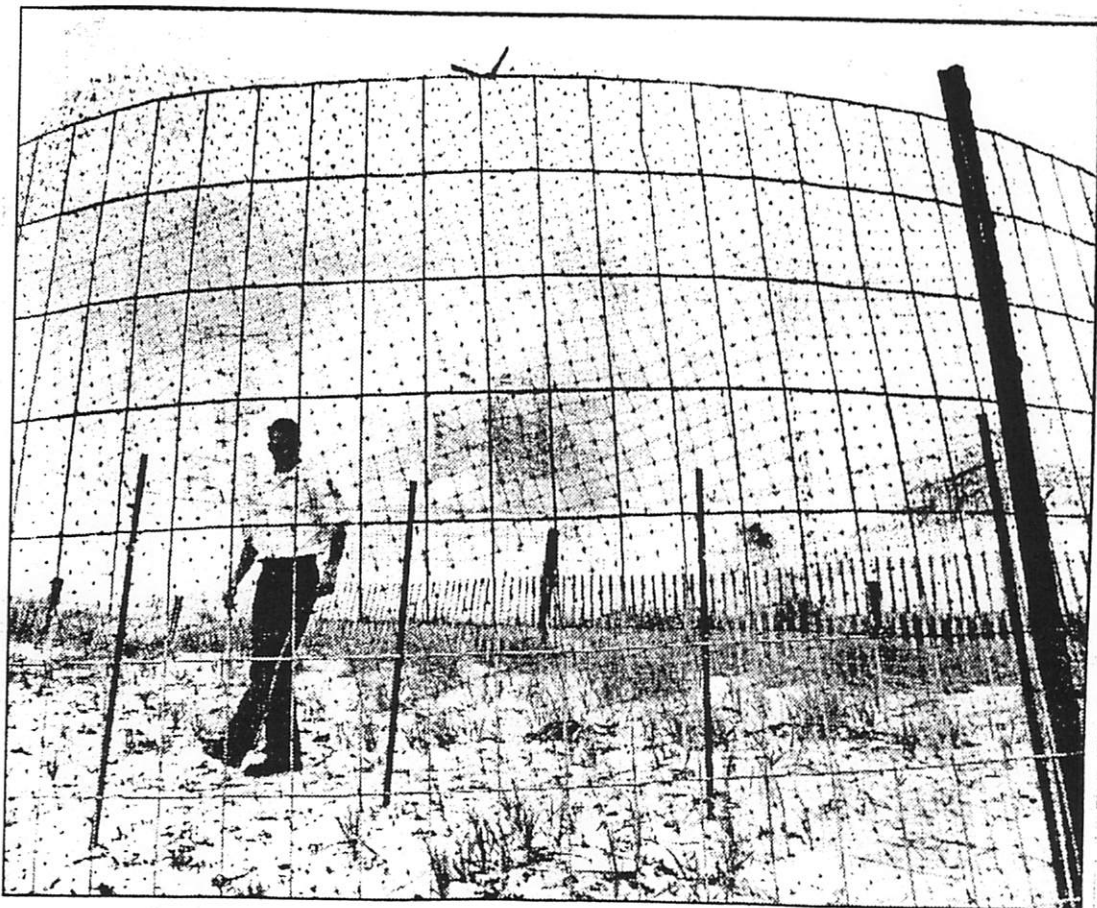
Hecker said the experiment will also benefit least terns, whose population has decreased in recent years because of beach grass. The average

tern colony is 100 pairs of birds, but Hecker said Duxbury reached a low last year with only 20 pairs.

Hecker said the terns have just arrived on the beach in the last few days.

Vautrinot said Reservation members will probably continue experimenting with bird habitats on the beach. He said one recommendation will probably be to cover more areas of the beach with sand but in smaller plots.

Vatrinot said the current experiment area will be effective for at least two years, the time it will take the grass to grow back to its original height. He said any experiment done next year would be conducted in another area.



Assistant Harbormaster Theodore Whitney checks for piping plover eggs.

GARY HIGGINS/The Patriot Ledger